

Plastic Containers To-Go

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Plastic takeout containers are taking over Boston College. Across campus, students are easily spotted carrying their food in these containers from the dining halls. Some students carry their hot lunches to eat back in their dorms. Others might have a cold sandwich, in the smaller container, to munch on during class. Many students even use them as cereal bowls. The “to go” containers are everywhere. Last year alone, 871,500 plastic to-go containers were used at BC (Kaiser). This is a problem because they are not leaving. They are not leaving BC, and they are not leaving the landfill. The plastic to-go containers in the dining halls should be eliminated at BC and replaced with compostable containers to eliminate the many problems caused by plastics.

Comprised only of plastic, the containers are an environmental nightmare. Trash cans all over campus are filled rapidly with the bulky boxes. This creates less space for actual trash to be thrown away, and the overflow of excess trash litters the area around the can. As of 1992, the average American threw away two pounds of plastic containers every month, and this fact is evident at BC as trash bags are filled at a rapid rate (Kimball 42). Once the containers leave the garbage can, they head to their final resting place in a landfill. In the present day, it is well known that plastic is not biodegradable. Debi Kimball states, “Plastic is virtually immortal: If the Pilgrims had had six-packs, the six-pack rings would still be around today” (42). Thus, plastic will forever sit in a landfill, taking up approximately 19.9 percent of the space (Brown 5). Also, not only is the final location of plastic a major issue, but the production of plastic uses a great deal of energy and valuable resources.

Although plastic will not leave a landfill, it can be recycled. However, this is an option that is rare at BC. The only dining hall that provides a recycling bin for the large plastic containers is McElroy. Some of the other dining locations such as Stuart (Newton campus) and Lyons have recycling bins, but only for paper products and bottles. At Lower Live dining hall, all plates, trash, recyclables, and silverware are placed on a conveyor belt that moves into the back. No one knows what is being thrown away or recycled in the back unless they have worked there. I would like to think that everything that could be recycled is, but the workers are probably more concerned about getting the mass amounts of trash cleared than recycling it. Lower Live dining hall uses about 3000 containers in one day, which equals 240 pounds (BCDS). Those numbers equals out to about 3,024,000 containers in four years at one dining hall alone, which equals the weight of eighty-eight Honda Civics (BCDS). These are statistics that BC should not be proud of or plastering all over their sustainability page. It shows there is a dire need for more options for recycling the containers. If BC is not going to provide a recycling option, then the containers should be eliminated altogether.

In place of the plastic takeout cartons, compostable items, such as corn-based products, could be used instead. For example, the dining area at Hillside, uses compostable plates that are placed into a slot only after leftover food is deposited in the trash. Also, Addie's Loft, the dining option known for its organic food choices and locally grown items, provides the same corn-based plates and Saran wrap. The wrap is useful to those taking the food out of the dining hall. Although it is essentially plastic, it is still less than a large square container. The BCDS website proudly states that it switched from using Styrofoam plates to compostable ones at Hillside dining hall, which is something to be happy about (BCDS). However, the website fails to say that Lyons dining hall still provides Styrofoam plates for sandwiches. It is time for BC to make

the same changes that they made at Hillside in the remainder of its dining halls as soon as possible.

I understand that purchasing corn-based and biodegradable products can be expensive. Other schools around the country, however, are managing to fund environmental friendly dining materials without a problem. The University of Vermont provides corn-based silverware, plates, takeout containers, and other products for their students. They also have a wide array of recycling options and composting. After viewing UVM's University Dining Services website, it is clear that they are focused on doing their part to reduce their production of waste. Under the "Biodegradable Products" section, it states that the "items available in the dining halls that are compostable include brown napkins, grill liner paper, Green Mountain Coffee cups, Greenwave paper plates, parfait cups, and other items as requested" ("Social"). Even if it means increasing food prices in the dining halls, BC should be able to find a way to fund environment-friendly kitchenware.

UVM is not the only school with green initiatives. Another school that is pushing its recycling efforts is the University of Maryland. In a recent newspaper article from the University, it states that the "campus is now able to recycle all seven categories of plastics," and can recycle "hard plastic containers and carry-out salad containers (Abdill). At the University of Alabama recycling bins were made more easily available for students, and there was a 151 percent increase in recycled goods over one year (Drago). This proves that if the school provides more recycling options for students, it could greatly increase the amount of recycled goods. I only provided examples from three schools, but there are many others who are making strides to recycle more and purchase biodegradable products, and it is time that BC joined the act.

Another issue at BC is that some dining hall directors might argue that the plastic containers need to be rinsed of all food and sauces before being recycled. This could develop into a work study job for those who are eco-friendly and working in the dining facilities. Even providing students with a way to rinse their own containers in the dining hall before recycling them could make the job easier. The Boston College Dining Services Sustainability webpage discusses an initiative in November 2007 when a “student sorting program” was established at Stuart Dining Hall. They set goals to reduce the amount of plastic that was used and educated diners about plastic and recycling. The three-week study showed a “nine percent decrease in usage of all plastic ‘to go’ items” (BCDS). This program seemed like a great asset to the dining hall facility, but what happened to it? As a student who frequents Stuart Dining hall, nothing of the sort is apparent anymore.

In addition to waste, the plastic containers might not be the best choice health wise. It is known that food should not be heated in microwaves in plastic containers. This could be similar to placing hot food in the container and sealing the lid shut. Is the plastic melting and emitting harmful gases onto your food? It is not clear what is actually happening, but it does not seem to be beneficial. All plastics are identified by a code system provided by the Society of the Plastics Industry (SPI) based on the materials the plastic product is made of (Mustafa & Hansmann 235). The plastic containers at BC have the code number “6” found in the center of the triangle on the underside of the container. The “6” means that the plastic contains Polystyrene (PS), which “may be one of the most controversial plastics due to its connections with chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)” (Kimball 48). CFCs are the chemicals known for causing destruction to the ozone layer of the Earth and were banned by U.S. industries (Kimball 48). It is evident that this type of plastic might not be the best choice to serve hot food in. Switching to corn-based products would

eliminate the addition of any unnecessary chemicals to the food, and if there were any type of melting occurring, the additives would be natural.

I admit that the plastic containers are simply more convenient and easier to use. I do agree that Saran wrap can be a pain and the containers provide an easy way to carry food back and forth, but it cannot always be about convenience. From my own experience at BC, I have observed people eating in the dining halls out of takeout containers. If someone is eating in the dining hall, why use a takeout container? Perhaps it is easier and cleaner to use, especially for a heaping pile of nachos or to shake up a salad, but a plate works just as well. In reference to salads, the BCDS site discusses how large china bowls were purchased “to make it easier to choose china over plastic” (BCDS). Although the bowls are present at the salad bar, plastic to-go containers are too, and more people reach for those because of the ability to close the cover. Almost everyone is guilty of being lazy and choosing the takeout container just because it is “easier.” Why not eliminate the laziness by removing the containers altogether?

Along with to-go containers, BC dining facilities often provide plastic silverware and plastic bags to students. These, too, can be replaced with better alternatives, such as corn-based silverware or real metal silverware. BCDS discusses how reusable shopping bags are provided to students during the Farmer’s Market (BCDS). The issue with this is that the Farmer’s Market only occurs in September and October, and the bags were not distributed well. Why not have the bags available for students all year, even if they have to pay a small fee to purchase one. Also, most students have capable backpacks, purses, or hands that can carry their food for them rather than a plastic bag. After the takeout containers are addressed by the school, these items also need to be taken into account.

It is important to keep in mind that not all college students' first priority is recycling everything that they use. I am not trying to say that all college students are lazy when it comes recycling, but many simply care more than others. Some put in more of an effort to rinse out their containers and recycle them while others do not. Some will walk a few extra steps to a recycling bin, others go to the closest trash can. Some will stuff a plastic bag with cereal boxes rather than a backpack. It is okay that there are students who do not always make the most eco-friendly choices, but if BC makes those choices for them, the students do not have to do anything except eat.

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